

Unnikrishnan's Concert

A Review (June 2, 2001)

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SRUTI hosted a vocal music concert by P.Unnikrishnan on June 2, 2001. Unnikrishnan was accompanied by Vittal Ramamurthy on the violin and Tiruchur Narendran on the mridangam. This was one of the best concerts arranged in the new millennium by SRUTI.

Unnikrishnan started the concert with the crisp rendering of a varnam in Sahana followed by the Swathithirunal krithi *Deva Deva Kalayamithe*. This krithi rendered in Mayamalavagaula was popularized in the sixties by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and later by M.S. Subbalakshmi. Unnikrishnan rendered the krithi with *bhava*, followed by an impressive *niraval*. However, the ensuing kalpana swaras could have been rendered with better combination of swaras and long phrases (Mayamalavagaula gives abundant scope for creative kalpana swaras). This was followed by a detailed rendering of a krithi in Begada wherein he delineated the raga swarupam with clarity and precision.

After an elaborate rendering of Subbaraya Sastry's *Janani Ninnu Vina* in Ritigaula and a short and sweet Bhavapriya, Unnikrishnan recited the main encore of the concert in Todi. For this he chose Dikshitar's *Sri Krishnam Bhaja Manasa*. This is one of the gems of Dikshitar's compositions in Todi, and unlike most kritis of Dikshitar, lends itself to considerable improvisation (sangathis). Unnikrishnan rendered a detailed alapana in Todi building the raga like a skillful architect, ornamenting the alapana with a beautiful *grahabedam* in Sankarabharanam. After an elaborate *niraval* on the phrase *Shanka Chakra Gada Padma*, the ensuing kalpana swaras were adorned with a symphony of enchanting combination of swaras in a complex collection of long and short phrases.

All of Dikshitar's krithis (I have listened to) are well structured, complete in all music details. Thus the performing artists do not have much freedom other than following meticulously the route laid down by Dikshitar while rendering his krithis. The degree of excellence of the performance is measured by how well the artist follows the structure laid down by Dikshitar and reproduces the krithi in detail. However *Krishnam Bhaja Manasa* is an exception where Dikshitar has given some freedom for creativity in improvisation. Unnikrishnan took advantage of this opportunity and rendered the song brilliantly.

Next, the *Ragam Thanam Pallavi* in Bilahari was embellished with an impressive garland of kalpana swaras in different ragas (Kalyanavasantham, Mohanam and Kapi). I noticed a significant pause while switching between ragas during the kalpana swara rendering. This is unlike Unnikrishnan. He concluded the concert after a variety of short krithis including a movie song in Malayalam.

It is needless to mention the critical importance of the accompanists for the success of a vocal concert. Both Vittal Ramamurthy and Tiruchur Narendran provided wonderful support to Unnikrishnan's brilliant performance. There was a good rapport between the performing artists. This is in contrast to the concert by T.N. Seshagopalan (in 2000) where we witnessed the helplessness of the vocalist without good support from the accompanists. Interestingly, both Seshagopalan and Unnikrishnan chose Dikshitar's *Sri Krishnam Bhaja Manasa* for their main encore!!!

It was very pleasing to see an attentive and cooperative audience strictly adhering to the request by the SRUTI managing committee not to send chits to the artist during the course of the concert (which is quite annoying to the performing artist). Kudos to the patrons of SRUTI for their support and cooperation in making the concert a memorable one.

[Dr. P. Swaminathan (Ambler, PA), a former president of SRUTI, is a music enthusiast. He is a computational chemist by profession.]